
Synthesizing Four Views of the Return of Christ

—*Ph.D. Dissertation Proposal*—

by

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INTRODUCTION

No consensus has ever existed in the field of eschatology. Truly, it is “a highly complex subject” that is filled with “disagreement”¹ and “a variety of eschatological theories.”² But in the nineteen-plus centuries of Church history, three major eschatological views have evolved. Each is centered on the return of Christ. They are the “three major views on the time and nature of this [the]

¹ Henry A. Virkler, *Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 1981), 190.

² *Ibid.*, 201.

millennium”³ or, as Sproul termed it, the “three standard millennial positions.”⁴ At different times and in different places, each of these views has held sway as the prominent view.

This lack of consensus, however, has led to major disarray and division. Premillennialists say the amillennialists are wrong. Amillennialists say the premillennialists are wrong. Postmillennialists say they are right and everybody else is wrong. Few scholars and even fewer lay people are aware that there is another comprehensive view—the preterist view.

Justifying Four Views

Traditionally, the preterist view has been regarded as mostly, or solely, an interpretative approach to the book of Revelation, as are the idealist and historicist views. The futurist view of Revelation is then subdivided, at Revelation 20, into “the three main views on the Millennium.”⁵ But Erickson explained that preterist, idealist, historicist, and futurist are “in general . . . four ways to interpret Biblical eschatology. While these are particularly applied to distinctly apocalyptic portions of the Bible such as the Book of Revelation, they are applied to other segments as well.”⁶ In his *Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology*, he defined the preterist view as “an interpretation of eschatology and particularly the Book of Revelation”⁷ He also defined “the idealist interpretation of eschatology” as “an approach . . . the symbolic view of eschatology or of the Book of Revelation.”⁸ He offered no definition for the historicist view.

For my purpose, I will address the three major or standard views. But I will also elevate and present the preterist view as a fourth and comparable view. Preterism deserves this equal representation and treatment. Along with the other three views, it has evolved into a comprehensive and distinctive eschatology. It now encompasses the fulfillment of all eschatological passages throughout the Bible and offers a unique millennial position, as well.⁹ Therefore, it is worthy of

³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 1994), 1109.

⁴ R.C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 1998), 194.

⁵ Steve Gregg, ed., *Revelation Four Views* (Nashville, TN.: Thomas Nelson, 1997), *xiv*, 457f.

⁶ Millard J. Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 1977, 1998), 30.

⁷ Millard J. Erickson, *Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Book House, 1986), 133.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁹ Max R. King, *The Cross and the Parousia of Christ* (Warren, OH.: Writing and Research Ministry, The Parkman Road Church of Christ, 1987), 207-261.

equal status, analysis, and synthesis consideration, even though it is not as well known, recognized, or believed, as are the other three views.

Sproul certainly regarded the preterist view as a full-fledged eschatological view in his recent book, *The Last Days According to Jesus*. He interacted with works of three full-preterist writers (J. Stuart Russell,¹⁰ Max R. King,¹¹ and Edward E. Stevens¹²). His stated purpose was “to evaluate moderate preterism and its view of eschatology”¹³ and “to examine and evaluate the various claims of preterism, both full and partial.”¹⁴ Terry, whose classic *Biblical Hermeneutics* “was the textbook of choice for most seminaries through the 1970s,”¹⁵ not only devoted “the larger portion” of his book to “Special Hermeneutics,” but presented numerous preterist interpretative principles for the Bible’s “prophetic symbolism” and its “apocalyptic books.”¹⁶ Neither Sproul nor Terry limited their treatment of preterism to only the book of Revelation. Moreover and in this student’s opinion, Sproul’s book has done more than any previous work to increase the awareness, legitimacy, and credibility of the preterist view.

On the other hand, the unique distinctives of the idealist and historicist views essentially remain as interpretative approaches to the book of Revelation. Hence, I will not grant them equivalent-view status. Instead, I will address them as variations under the amillennialist view.¹⁷ Likewise, I will deal with historic premillennialism, dispensational premillennialism, and the recently developed progressive dispensationalism under the premillennial view.

Complicating matters somewhat further is the reality that the lines of demarcation between views are not always clear. Some overlapping and muddying occurs. For example, most postmillennialists subscribe to a partial preterist view. Hence, Sproul referred to Kenneth L. Gentry as a “postmillenarian preterist.”¹⁸ In a similar manner, amillennialism and postmillennialism are quite compatible. Some of their beliefs blend together and

¹⁰ J. Stuart Russell, *The Parousia: A Critical Inquiry into the New Testament Doctrine of Our Lord’s Second Coming* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Book House, 1887, 1983).

¹¹ Max R. King, *The Cross and the Parousia of Christ*.

¹² Edward E. Stevens, *Steven’s Response to Gentry: A Detailed Response to Dr. Kenneth L. Gentry Jr.’s . . . “A Brief Theological Analysis of Hyper-Preterism,”* (Bradford, PA.: Kingdom Publications, 1997).

¹³ Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus*, 24.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 202.

¹⁵ Gary DeMar, Product Advertisement, *Biblical Worldview*, March 2001, 24.

¹⁶ Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Eugene, OR.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1890, 1999), 5-6.

¹⁷ Seventh-day Adventists, who are the main proponents of historicism today, take an amalgamated, historicist-premillennial position – “Revelation Seminar,” July 15-August 30, 2001, three locations in Indianapolis, IN, by Seminars Unlimited, P.O. Box 66, Keene, TX 76059.

¹⁸ Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus*, 137.

are difficult to separate. Only premillennialists have stood apart and kept their view basically distinctive from the others. But this is changing.

One significant example has been the dialogue between dispensationalists and covenant theologians. According to Darrell L. Bock, this dialogue formally began in 1985 in sessions of the Dispensational Study Group that were held at the annual meetings of the Evangelical Theological Society. During my eight years as an ETS member, I have attended two of these sessions—ones that dealt with eschatological issues (premillennialism and amillennialism). Bock noted that while dispensationalism “had contributed so mightily to evangelicalism in the twentieth century, popularizing the prophetic message of the Bible,” dispensationalists “had much to learn from other traditions.” He admitted that “after a half century of heated polemic . . . there was a way to change the tone of evangelical dialogue between traditions.” The result of these ongoing sessions has been the emergence of “a new and discernibly different ‘progressive dispensationalism.’”¹⁹ Assuredly, this is a step in the right direction—toward synthesis.

But what also must be emphasized is that throughout the history of the Church no one eschatological view has ever been granted the sole status of orthodoxy. All have been allowable.

With the above categorization and overlapping difficulties in mind, I propose to address the four exhaustive and distinctive eschatological views, and to do so in the order of their claimed time of historical fulfillment. This will be: preterist, premillennialist, amillennialist, and postmillennialist. I believe such a time-focused framework will facilitate an orderly progression through my synthesizing process. After all, time is the primary defining characteristic and categorizing element in the Church’s evolved system of eschatological views. Furthermore, I believe that this breadth of treatment must be undertaken in order to incorporate all the viable eschatological distinctives necessary for a viable synthesization. Only with this degree of comprehensiveness can a consistent, coherent, and meaningful synthesis be achieved—one capable of mediating the differences that currently divide the four views of the return of Christ.

Unfortunately, for far too many Bible-believing and studying Christians, eschatology strikes a highly emotional chord and renders objective evaluation almost impossible in many church circles. Some Christians have decided to wash their hands of the whole mess calling themselves pan-millennialists (“It will all pan out in the end”) or pro-milers (“Whatever happens, they are for it”). As a result of the Church’s long and sordid history of disarray, divisiveness, and confusion, a large portion of Christians today ignore eschatology or dismiss it outright. Yet today, as never before, an end-times obsession characterizes a highly vocal minority. Even scholarly circles are not immune from eschatology’s lack of consensus.

¹⁹ Darrell L. Bock, “Charting Dispensationalism,” *Christianity Today*, 12 Sept. 1994, 26.

Scholarly Confusion

In 1987, *Christianity Today* magazine convened an Institute of five renowned scholars in the field of eschatology. They were: John Walvoord, who represented the pretribulational, premillennial view; Gleason Archer, the midtribulational, premillennial view; Alan F. Johnson, the posttribulational, premillennial view; Anthony A. Hoekema, the amillennial view, and John Jefferson Davis, the postmillennial view. Kenneth S. Kantzer, CT Senior Editor, served as the Institute dean and moderator.

Christianity Today then published an edited transcript of their day-long discussion as a special CT Institute insert.²⁰ But no resolution of their disagreements was offered. Instead, the article concluded that “Few doctrines unite and separate Christians as much as eschatology . . . one of the most divisive elements in recent Christian history.”

Also in the article, Walvoord noted that “between one-fifth and one-fourth of the Bible is prophecy.” Later, he rhetorically asked, “How many schools offer doctoral degrees in prophecy?” The obvious answer was none. He further volunteered, “In some of these schools, prophecy is almost a taboo subject. In fact, in some circles, if you admit you hold a particular view, like the premil [sic] view, you are automatically written off as being unacademic. There is a lot of scholarly pressure against a person taking any particular theology of the future.”

Kantzer recalled one of his seminary teachers as saying, “anyone whose hermeneutics led him to an amillennial or postmillennial position would be able to use that same hermeneutic to wipe out the bodily resurrection of Christ and other major doctrinal issues.” In a sidebar article titled “Agreement Is Not Required,” he confided, “In short, we grant that both sides [amills and premills] have occasionally been victimized by a faulty hermeneutic. But . . . by and large, both interpretations have been built on sound biblical scholarship.” I ask, How can admittance of an occasional “faulty hermeneutic” be reconciled as also being “sound biblical scholarship?” One thing is for sure, these statements reflect the disarray, divisiveness, and confusion inherent in this field.

In the twelve years since *Christianity Today’s* Institute of scholars many scholarly works have endeavored to improve the understanding of eschatology. Perhaps, some progress has been made. But in 1998, Sproul continued to believe that “the divisions that exist within the Christian community are understandable, considering that both the subject matter and the literary genre of future prophecy are exceedingly difficult.” He concluded that we should not “push the Bible aside or neglect its eschatological sections. On the contrary, the interpretative difficulties . . . simply call us to a greater

²⁰ Kenneth S. Kantzer, ed., “Our Future Hope: Eschatology and Its Role in the Church,” *Christianity Today*, 6 February 1987, 1-14 (I).

diligence and persistence in seeking their solution.”²¹ To date, and from my perspective, no solution has been found, or even offered. The purpose of this dissertation will be to move toward that overall solution via synthesizing four views of the return of Christ into one.

Trail of Failed Predictions

Making matters worse is the trail of sensational tactics and failed eschatological predictions by many of the Church’s end-saying pundits. For example:²²

- Church father Hippolytus (A.D. 170 – 236) predicted the world end in A.D. 500, based on his analysis of the dimensions of Noah’s Ark.
- In A.D. 999, when the end of the millennium drew near, Christian expectations of an imminent end if the world flooded the European continent. A.D. 1000 was a bust, as well as, a revised A.D. 1033 date.
- Christopher Columbus allowed 155 years for all mankind to be converted to Christianity, after which the world would end.
- William Miller, founder of the Millerite movement in America, predicted Christ would come and the world would end sometime between March 21, 1843 and March 21, 1844. The date was later revised to October 22, 1844.
- Hal Lindsey in his best-selling book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, cited the rebirth of Israel in 1948 as *the* prophetic sign. Within one generation (forty years, by 1988) we would witness the end of the present world and the return of Christ. The dust jacket of the book’s 1977 edition warned readers not to make plans beyond 1985.
- In 1978, Gary Wilburn claimed in a *Christianity Today* article, “The Doomsday Chic,” that “the world must end within one generation from the birth of the State of Israel.”
- In 1978, Salem Kirban in his book, *The Rise of Antichrist*, claimed, “We are already living in the *age of Antichrist!* The world is on the threshold of catastrophe.”

²¹ Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus*, 203.

²² The following examples were selected from the book by John Noe, *Beyond the End Times* (Bradford, PA.: International Preterist Association, 1999), 24-29. For another list of examples, see Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, (Brentwood, TN.: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991), chapter one, “The Dating Game,” 7-18.

- In this same year, West Coast Pastor, Chuck Smith” wrote in his book *Future Survival* that he was “convinced that the Lord is coming for his Church before the end of 1981.”
- In 1988, Edgar C. Whisenant sent shock waves through Christian circles with his 4.5 million copies of *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*.
- In 1990, John F. Walvoord re-released his 1974 book, *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis*. It sold over one and a half million copies by playing off the apocalyptic fears of the American war with Iraq leading into the final Battle of Armageddon. When the war was over, so were its sales.
- In 1992, front-page pictures of a sign from a Seoul, South Korean church stating ‘Rapture Oct 28, ’92 Jesus Is Coming!’ were splashed around the world by the news media.
- On March 8, 1993 and in the middle of the Waco crisis, I appeared on CNN’s *Larry King Live*, along with author and fellow Christian, Harold Camping, to refute his prediction of the return of Christ and the end of the world in September of 1994. All this was based on his book, appropriately titled *1994*.

Sad to say, this centuries-long legacy has discredited the gospel message in the eyes of the world. Following a recent round of failed apocalyptic ravings and doomsday predictions by respected Church leaders and which accompanied the Persian Gulf War, a classic cartoon appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*. It pictured a monk walking down the street in a robe and sandals and carrying a sign that read, “Correction, disregard last doomsday message.”²³

Fact is, the history of the Church is littered with respected Christian leaders who have claimed certain knowledge of end-time events and tried to fit the events of their day into the fulfillment of end-time prophecy. The impression this must leave is, if the Church is not right on its facts, it is not right on its faith, either. Surely something is wrong. Yet this is exactly how many of us are still being trained today. It seems that millions of American evangelicals have an insatiable appetite for the apocalyptic. A case in point is the recent *Left Behind* phenomena. Nothing in the history of Christian retailing compares to the skyrocketing sales of this blockbuster series. *World* magazine recently reported that sales to date were:

. . . some 27 million copies. Throw in the spinoffs such as the children’s series . . . and audio products, and the number soars to 38 million. . . . this is more than the Harry Potter books . . . which have sold a mere 23 million.²⁴

²³ *The Wall Street Journal*, (New York), 5 August 1991.

²⁴ Gene Edward Veith, “Going Mainstream,” *World*, 14 July, 2001, 46.

In a news article following the Y2K fiasco, *World* magazine related how many Y2K doomsayers, including the *Left Behind* authors, were forced to backpedal away from failed doomsday predictions:

Meanwhile, Y2K doomsayers were forced to backpedal. Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, authors of the *Left Behind* series, had claimed online that the bug would wreak havoc, “making it possible for the Antichrist or his emissaries . . . to dominate the world commercially until it is destroyed.” By the end of the year, the quote came back to haunt them. “We regret having talked about it,” Mr. Jenkins blushed to *The Washington Post*.²⁵

Most likely, the popular end-saying tradition will go on and on. But far more than an attempt to foresee the future; it may actually condition it. Michael G. Maudlin, Managing Editor of *Christianity Today* magazine observed how end-time beliefs do have negative consequences:

There are dangers to end-times obsessions: a disinclination to work toward long-term solutions, a propensity to focus on prophetic fulfillment at the expense of ethical concerns. . . and a perverse satisfaction in cultural decay.²⁶

Another *Christianity Today* magazine article titled, “FutureTense: How do we live under the shadow of ‘the end’?” likewise noted that end-time ideas have consequences. Zoba commented that “the eschatological titillation of some has caused the disaffection of others and the confusion of many.”²⁷ She also pondered a logical question and reached an all-to-common conclusion. Since “there has been no consensus on things eschatological among evangelicals . . . where does that leave us? The variety of reasonable points of view negates, in part at least, the certainty of any one in particular.” Then she expressed the eschatological frustration many, if not most, Christians feel. She rhetorically asked, “But if it is all so muddled and indeterminable, how can we know anything at all about these mysterious passages that compose such a significant portion of the New Testament?”²⁸

Clapp in his *Christianity Today* article, “Overdosing on the Apocalypse: How end-times junkies can become sane and responsible” lamented that “Apocalyptic imagination, like dynamite, is always dangerous.”

²⁵ Chris Stamper, “Feeling a little let down,” *World*, 15 January 2000, 25.

²⁶ Michael G. Maudlin, “Obsessed with the End Times,” *Christianity Today*, 5 October 1998, 6.

²⁷ Wendy Murray Zoba, “FutureTense: How do we live under the shadow of ‘the end’?” *Christianity Today*, 2 October, 1995, 19 (19-23).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

He called for a more “responsible apocalypticism,” but failed to give any guidelines or steps on how to achieve it.²⁹

Liberal Attack and Incursion

Perhaps the most damage caused by the Church’s eschatological disarray, divisiveness, and confusion has occurred from a vicious movement within it. Over the past two centuries, liberal scholars have attacked the inspiration of the New Testament and the integrity of Christ. In the first chapter of his book, *Jesus and the Last Days*, Beasley-Murray cited example after example of liberal scholars attacking the supposed failure of eschatological events to occur within the lifetime of Jesus’ 1st-century generation as the “fundamental error” which “shows that his [Jesus’] system is discredited.”³⁰

Sproul concurred:

In seminary I was exposed daily to critical theories espoused by my professors regarding the Scriptures. What stands out in my memory of those days is the heavy emphasis on biblical texts regarding the return of Christ, which were constantly cited as examples of errors in the New Testament and proof that the text had been edited to accommodate the crisis in the early church caused by the so-called parousia-delay of Jesus.³¹

Sproul has termed this two-century-old assault by liberal scholarship on the Bible and on Jesus Himself “one of the most critical issues that the Church faces today.” He further related that “I have never been satisfied that the evangelical community has dealt with the problems of the time-frame references that are set forth in the New Testament about the near-term expectations . . . things that were to happen within the first century.”³² In his recent book on preterism, Sproul warned that “We must take seriously the skeptic’s critique of the time-frame references of New Testament prophecy, and we must answer them convincingly.”³³ According to Sproul, we evangelicals have not answered them convincingly.

Fact is, Jesus made clear, concrete, future predictions about his coming in glory that seemingly did not come to pass. Or so we have been told. Liberal

²⁹ Rodney Clapp, “Overdosing on the Apocalypse: How end-times junkies can become sane and responsible,” *Christianity Today*, 28 October, 1991, 26-29.

³⁰ George R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Last Days* (Peabody, MA.: Hendrickson, 1993), 11-12.

³¹ Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus*, 14-15.

³² R.C. Sproul, “Last Days Madness” presentation, Ligonier Ministries’ National Conference 1999. Cassette.

³³ Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus*, 203.

criticism especially concentrates on that point. They are more than aware of the dilemma which nonoccurrence presents for the Christian Church and the impossibility of escaping it without being disloyal to Christ. Their weighty criticism, truly, should be a “cause for pause” for anyone who believes in the inspiration and authority of Scripture. The integrity of Christ and all the New Testament writers is at stake.

Carroll, for example, in his book titled, *When Prophecies Failed*, discussed “the phenomenon of disconfirmed expectation.” He charged that this tendency was not “particular to Marxian thought or limited to modern political structures.” To the contrary, it went “back much further in time and thought to the early centuries of Christianity when various Christian communities struggled to come to terms with the failure of the parousia” This then “gave rise to the need for interpretation of the traditions so as to justify them in light of what had *not* happened.”³⁴

Aland first confirmed that “it was the definite conviction not only of Paul, but of all Christians of that time, that they themselves would experience the return of the Lord.”³⁵ Later, he disclosed that “around the middle of the second century . . . the Shepherd of Hermas thinks he has found a solution . . . the Parousia—the Lord’s return—has been postponed for the sake of Christians themselves At first, people looked at it as only a brief postponement, as the Shephard of Hermas clearly expresses. . . . But soon . . . it was conceived of as a longer and longer period, until finally—this is today’s situation”³⁶

Daley rationalized that eschatology is often seen as a “by-product of failed eschatological hope – a way of coping intellectually with the non-fulfillment of first-century apocalyptic fantasies.” And since “the fulfillment of their early hopes was surely delayed,” it “required” a “reorientation of the time-line of its eschatological hope.”³⁷

Pelikan saw it this way, “When the consummation was postponed,” this necessitated “the reinterpretation of biblical passages that had carried eschatological connotation . . . toward a more complex description of the life of faith . . . in the development of Christian eschatology.”³⁸

The informed critics of the Christian faith have had no trouble seeing though the postponement theories, biblical inconsistencies, and poor scholarship of conservative attempts to cover-up for Jesus’ predictions to return within the lifetime of his contemporaries. Not only have cover-up attempts directly

³⁴ Robert P. Carroll, *When Prophecies Failed* (New York: A Crossroads Book, 1979), 2.

³⁵ Kurt Aland, *A History of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 87.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 91-92.

³⁷ Brian E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church* (Cambridge, MA.: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 3.

³⁸ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), Vol. 1, “The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition,” 123-124.

contradicted the teachings of Jesus, they just added ammunition to the skeptics' claims against Jesus' divinity and the inerrancy of the Bible.

It is called the "battle for the Bible." And in America, especially over the past 50 years, major denominations and seminaries have fallen victim to this liberal/skeptic attack on the Bible and on the integrity and deity of Christ.

In sum, eschatology today is a most relevant topic and filled with plenty of confusion, controversy, and lack of consensus. It is ripe for a fresh approach.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this theoretical study is to analyze the four eschatological views of the historic, evangelical, and conservative Church, regarding the return of Christ, to determine their principal strengths and weaknesses and to synthesize them into one meaningful, coherent, and consistent whole. This integration process will be achieved by a solution of synthesis—i.e. keeping strengths and discarding weaknesses.

Questions to Be Answered

The general research question to be answered is: What is the solution to the confusion, conflict, and divisiveness of the Church's four eschatological views of the return of Christ?

Secondary questions are:

1. What is the methodology for that solution?
2. How can the major strengths and weaknesses be identified and demonstrated?
3. Can only the strengths from these four views be synthesized into one meaningful, coherent, and consistent whole?
4. Have any such synthesization attempts been tried before and with what degree of success?

Significance of the Study

If eschatology was only a small appendix of or minor conclusion to the Christian faith, our lack of consensus might be viewed as majoring on a minor or much to do about nothing. But as Daley understood, there is "an eschatological dimension to every aspect of Christian faith and reflection

because it touches so many of the central themes of faith.”³⁹ Sproul reported that “It has been argued that no less than two thirds of the content of the New Testament is concerned directly or indirectly with eschatology”⁴⁰ So, we are not talking about a relatively insignificant issue.

To date, to my knowledge, and after numerous consultations with fellow members of the Evangelical Theological Society and six Trinity faculty members, and after a personal literature search, as well as, one employing the services of two Trinity-recommended, professional researchers (EPA Research and Ruth Dalman), a synthesis treatment of the return of Christ, or of any other major eschatological event, has never been done before—i.e. one that spans the entire spectrum of conservative, eschatological views. (For more, see Literature Review – Synthesization Attempts.)

Spykman, in the textbook used in Trinity’s Systematic Theology I & II courses, writes regarding biblical eschatology, “It is a highly problematic, critical venture, perhaps, more so than ever before, and for that reason perhaps also a matter of increasingly high priority.”⁴¹

Louis Berkhof noted in his book, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, that:

The doctrine of the last things never stood in the center of attention, is one of the least developed doctrines, and therefore calls for no elaborate discussion It may be that, as Dr. Orr surmises, we have now reached that point in the history of dogma in which the doctrine of the last things will receive greater attention and be brought to further development.⁴²

Conspicuously, no creedal council ever debated eschatology. Even the 16th-century Reformers spent little time with it. Hoeksema granted, “At the time of the Reformation eschatology did not receive its proper place and attention in dogmatics.”⁴³ Spykman added:

Luther, however, dealt with the doctrine of “last things” in only fragmentary ways. Calvin, too, gave it only passing attention. Noteworthy among his voluminous writings is the absence of a commentary on the book of Revelation. Far-reaching conclusions are often drawn from this omission, including indictments of an alleged eschatological impoverishment in the Calvinist tradition.”⁴⁴

³⁹ Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church*, 2.

⁴⁰ R. C. Sproul, “A Journey Back in Time,” *Tabletalk*, January 1999, 5.

⁴¹ Gordon J. Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 520.

⁴² Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, c1937, 1959), 267.

⁴³ Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Reformed Free Pub., 1966), 730.

⁴⁴ Spykman, *Reformed Theology*, 518-9.

In spite of the Reformers' scant attention to eschatology, the well-known "motto" of the Reformation, "*Ecclesia Reformata Semper Reformanda* . . . A Reformed church is always reforming!"⁴⁵ is certainly applicable here. Growing numbers of theologians are feeling that eschatology is the next area of Christianity ripe for reform. On the first page of the Introduction to his book, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology*, Erickson reapplied to our day James Orr's suggestion "that the particular interest of the modern age is eschatology, the one remaining undeveloped topic of theology."⁴⁶

The Reformers, as well as, these theologians are still right. We new-millennium moderns have not reached the point where reform is no longer needed. The embarrassing and perplexing field of end-time biblical prophecy, or eschatology, may be the next major area for reform.

Certainly, the issues in eschatology today are still relevant, the confusion still plentiful, and the controversies still divisive. Yet the return of Christ is the pivotal event to which all other eschatological events, issues, and concepts are tied.

Review of Literature

A literature review was conducted in three areas: 1) An overview of the history of eschatological thought; 2) An identification of the principal contemporary works; 3) An attempt to locate other synthesization works.

Historical Overview

The history of eschatological thought is a mixed history, indeed. Even the early Church fathers believed different things and sent confusing signals. Four fathers subscribed to a preterist understanding that at least some of Jesus' "all these things" (Mt. 24:34) had indeed occurred.

Eusebius, a 4th-century Christian leader and writer who is often called "the father of Church history:"

- Understood that the "great tribulation" of Jesus' Olivet prophecy was fulfilled in the events leading up to and culminating in A.D. 70:

It is fitting to add to these accounts the true prediction of our Saviour in which he foretold these events "For there shall be great tribulation" These things took place in this manner, in the

⁴⁵ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville, TN.: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 32.

⁴⁶ Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology*, 11.

second year of the reign of Vespasian [A.D. 70], in accordance to the prophecies of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ⁴⁷

. . . the abomination of desolation, proclaimed by the prophets [Dn. 9:27], stood in the very temple of God . . . which was now awaiting its total destruction by fire.⁴⁸

- Confirmed that a prerequisite condition for the coming of “the end” (i.e. the world-wide preaching of the gospel – Mt. 24:14) was fulfilled prior to the end of biblical Judaism:

Moses had foretold this very thing and in due course Christ sojourned in this life, and the teaching of the new covenant was borne to all nations, and at once the Romans besieged Jerusalem and destroyed it and the Temple there. At once the whole of the Mosaic law was abolished, with all that remained of the Old Covenant....⁴⁹

- Recorded that in obedience to the Lord’s Olivet Discourse instructions, 1st-century Christians fled from Jerusalem to Pella in Transjordan around A.D. 68 after the first siege and before the second one, and that no Christians were trapped and destroyed in the siege of Jerusalem which concluded in A.D.70.⁵⁰
- Affirmed that Jesus “came” in the fall of Jerusalem and in fulfillment of Zechariah’s end-time prophecy:

For so it was prophesied concerning the destruction of the royal glory of the Jewish nation Yea, in return for their insults to the Lord who thus prophesied, there has not failed for them lamentation, mourning and wailing. And it was only after our Saviour came laying their Temple low, and driving them from their country, to serve their enemies in a hostile land; wherefore even now every house and every soul is a prey to lamentation It is impossible to argue that this was fulfilled previously to the period of the Romans, in whose time the Jewish Temple was burnt for the second time . . .

⁴⁷ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 3, Ch.7, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1979), 141.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, Book 3, Ch.5., 138.

⁴⁹ Eusebius, W.J. Ferrar, ed., *Proof of the Gospel*, Book 1, Ch. 6 (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, reprinted 1981), 35.

⁵⁰ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 3, Ch. 5, 138.

and their city from then till now has been inhabited by foreign nations.⁵¹

When, then, we see what was of old foretold for the nations fulfilled in our own day, and when the lamentation and wailing that was predicted for the Jews, and the burning of the Temple and its utter destruction, can also be seen even now to have occurred according to the prediction, surely we must also agree that the King who was prophesied, the Christ of God, has come, since the signs of His coming have been shewn in each instance I have treated to have been clearly fulfilled.⁵²

Clement of Alexandria, writing in the 3rd century, placed the abomination of desolation of Daniel's 70th week prophecy in the time of Nero (A.D. 37-68):

' . . . in the one week,' was He Lord. The half of the week Nero held sway, and in the holy city Jerusalem placed the abomination; and in the half of the week he was taken away, and Otho, and Galba, and Vitallus. And Vespasian rose to the supreme power, and destroyed Jerusalem, and desolated the holy place.⁵³

Athanasius, writing in the 4th century,

- Linked Christ's coming with the destruction of Jerusalem and as the fulfillment of Daniel's 70 weeks prophecy (Da. 9:24-27):

And Jerusalem is to stand till his coming, and thenceforth, prophet and vision cease in Israel. . . . And this was why Jerusalem stood till then—namely that there they might be exercised in the types as a preparation for the reality . . . but from that time forth all prophecy is sealed and the city and temple taken, why are they so irreligious and so perverse as to see what has happened, and yet to deny Christ, Who has brought it all to pass? . . . What then has not come to pass, that the Christ must do? What is left unfulfilled, that the Jews should now disbelieve with impunity?⁵⁴

- Further he wrote:

⁵¹ Eusebius, W.J. Ferrar, ed. *The Proof of the Gospel* Book 7, Ch. 4, 144, 146 – his discussion on Zechariah 14:1-5.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 147.

⁵³ Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata, or Miscellanies*, Vol. 2, Book 1, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1979), 329.

⁵⁴ Athanasius, *Incarnation of the Word*, Section 39 Verse 3, Section 40 Verses 1-7 in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1978), Vol. 4, 57-58.

For no longer were these things to be done which belonged to Jerusalem which is beneath . . . the things pertaining to that time were fulfilled, and those which belonged to shadows had passed away.⁵⁵

Tertullian (A.D. 145-220), a premillennialist who looked for a future return of Christ, wrote that the coming of Christ included his birth, passion, and the destruction of Jerusalem in fulfillment of predictions made in Daniel 9:26 and in the completion of Daniel's 70 weeks of years:

Accordingly the times must be inquired into of the predicted and future nativity of the Christ, and of His passion, and of the extermination of the city of Jerusalem, that is, its devastation. For Daniel says, that 'both the holy city and the holy place are exterminated together with the coming Leader, and that the pinnacle is destroyed unto ruin.' And so the times of the coming Christ, the Leader, must be inquired into, which we shall trace in Daniel; and after computing them, shall prove Him to be come, even on the ground of the times prescribed, of the consequences which were ever announced as to follow His advent; in order that we may believe all to have been as well fulfilled as foreseen.

In such wise, therefore, did Daniel predict concerning Him, as to show both when and in what time He was to set the nations free; and how, after the passion of Christ, that city had to be exterminated! . . . Vespasian, in the first year of his empire, subdues the Jews in war For he reigned xi years. And thus, in the day of their storming, the Jews fulfilled the lxx hebdomads predicted in Daniel.⁵⁶

These writings of Eusebius, Clement of Alexandria, Athanasius, and even Tertullian more than suggest a preterist, or at least a partial-preterist, understanding among four early Church fathers of the past fulfillment of end-time prophecy and Jesus' coming in A.D. 70. Yet, amazingly, no creed or confession of the undivided or divided Church teaches or even recognizes that any kind of judgment or coming, or anything of eschatological significance, occurred in association with the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The creedal councils never discussed eschatological issues. And their eschatological sections only employed vague and fragmented language.

Writing in support of the preterist interpretation, Sproul reflected:

. . . the destruction of Jerusalem . . . certainly spelled the end of a crucial redemptive-historical epoch. It must be viewed as the end of some age. It also represents a significant visitation of the Lord in judgment and a vitally important 'day of the Lord.' Whether this was the *only* day of the Lord about

⁵⁵ Athanasius, *The Festal Letters*, Letter IV, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 4, 1978, 516-517.

⁵⁶ Tertullian, *An Answer to the Jews*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans 1979), 158, 160.

which Scripture speaks remains a major point of controversy among preterists.⁵⁷

On the other hand, other early-Church fathers, living during this same period, believed differently. Crutchfield explained, “Although not unanimously, many of the early church fathers believed they were living in the last days and were looking daily for the return of Christ.”⁵⁸ They had no notion of any end-time fulfillment as having occurred in A.D. 70. Church historian, Philip Schaff, agreed. “The most striking point in the eschatology of the ante-Nicene Age [A.D. 100-325] is the prominent chiliasm, or millenarianism, . . . a widely current opinion of distinguished teachers, such as Barnabas, Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Methodus, and Lactantius.”⁵⁹

Termed “chiliasm” (from the Greek word for a thousand years), this end-time belief coupled the Jewish expectation of an earthly Messianic kingdom with Christ’s return to the earth. Hill explained it this way:

Chiliasm is the ancient name for what today is known as premillennialism, the belief when Jesus Christ returns he will not execute the last judgment at once, but will first set up on earth a temporary kingdom, where resurrected saints will rule with him over non-resurrected subjects for a thousand years of peace and righteousness.⁶⁰

So from the very beginning of Church history, there was quite a difference of opinion. The early Church fathers were divided. But chiliasm, “a version of premillennialism” (and not preterism), became the prevailing view for the “first three centuries of Christian history” and “an end-time expectancy was commonplace.”⁶¹ Furthermore, “To many Christians today premillennialism is the very mark of Christian orthodoxy.”⁶² But with the advent of the Roman Church, chiliasm—a future reign of Christ, the Messiah, on earth for a literal, or even symbolic, thousand years—was formally condemned and rejected by the Church at the Council of Ephesus in A.D. 432. “So why did the Church reject chiliasm?” asked Hill. “One common criticism . . . known from Origen to the

⁵⁷ Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus*, 203.

⁵⁸ Larry V. Crutchfield “The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation in the Apostolic Fathers” chapter in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, Thomas Ice & Timothy Demy, gen. eds. (Eugene, OR.: Harvest House, 1995), 85.

⁵⁹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (New York: Scribner, 1884), Vol. 2, 614.

⁶⁰ Charles E. Hill, “Why the Early Church Finally Rejected Premillennialism,” *Modern Reformation*, Jan/Feb. 1999, 16.

⁶¹ Richard Kyle, *The Last Days Are Here Again* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 1998), 188.

⁶² Hill, “Why the Early Church . . .”, 16.

Augsburg Confession and beyond, is that chiliasm is a ‘Jewish’ error [Origen, *de Princ.*2.11.2].”⁶³

Yet for almost three quarters of Church history (4th through the 18th Century) chiliasm “was not regarded as a mark of neither orthodoxy nor of heresy, but as one permissible opinion among others within the range of permissible opinions.”⁶² During this time it remained relatively dormant except for its association with a few fringe and apocalyptic groups who were viewed as fanatical. But the earliest reality was that “the early church lived in expectation of Christ’s return.”⁶⁵ Supposedly, this failed to happen.

Consequently, next in the development of eschatological thought was a bold attempt to explain why Jesus had not returned, why no end-time events had happened as had been expected (Jn. 16:13), and why “visions of an impending end had largely waned.”⁶⁶ Augustine penned his famous book, *The City of God*. In it, he moved the Church away from literal apocalypticism and a belief in the imminent coming of Christ by applying Origen’s (185-253 A.D.) allegorical method of interpretation. This symbolic approach, which has been adopted by both amillennial and postmillennial views, enabled the Church to escape from being pinned down as to the time for Christ’s so-called Second Coming. Augustine claimed that “the city of God” was a spiritual state, over “the earthly city.”⁶⁷ Likewise, he reinterpreted the millennium as being spiritually fulfilled in the life of the Church and taught that the Church was the Messianic kingdom. It began at Christ’s first coming, was present on earth back then, and referred to the Church age until the end of the world. Augustine flatly rejected the idea of a future kingdom or future, literal millennial period.⁶⁸ His amillennial view so dominated the Church from the 4th through the 16th Century that it is the only view expressed in the historic creeds.

Tillich summarized Augustine’s eschatological perspective quite succinctly:

But one thing was clear for him (Augustine): there is no thousand-year stage in world history, no third age. Chiliasm or millennialism was denied by him. Christ rules the church in this present time; there are the thousand years. There is no stage of history beyond the one in which we are living. The kingdom of God rules through the hierarchy, and the chiliasts are wrong. We should not

⁶³ Ibid., 17.

⁶² Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of Development of Doctrine*, 125.

⁶⁵ George Eldon Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1956), 20. As proof, Ladd cited statements from: the Didache, Barnabas, The Shepard of Hermas, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Lactantius, and Hippolytus (pp- 20-31).

⁶⁶ Kyle, *The Last Days Are Here Again*, 188.

⁶⁷ Augustine, *The City of God*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, reprinted 1979), Vol. 2, Bk. 1, Preface, 1. and Bk. 11, chapter 1, 205.

⁶⁸ Augustine, *The City of God*, Vol. 2, Bk. 20, chapters 7 – 10, 426-432.

look beyond the present period in which the kingdom of God is present in terms of history.⁶⁹

During the 16th Century, the Reformers adopted an historicist interpretation of the book of Revelation and “found in the Antichrist a prophecy of the Papacy.”⁷⁰ Hence, the original form of the Westminster Confession of faith taught a Vatican and papal fulfillment of the Harlot and Beast of Revelation.⁷¹ Surprisingly, therefore, Luther “dealt with the doctrine of ‘last things’ in only fragmented ways. Calvin, too, gave it only passing attention. Noteworthy, among his voluminous writings is the absence of a commentary on the book of Revelation.”⁷²

On the other side of this confrontation, the Catholic Church did not take the Reformers’ attack lying down. Its Jesuit priesthood launched a two-pronged eschatological counterattack. In 1590, a Jesuit priest named Francisco Ribera (1537-1591) took an opposite tactic to deflect the Reformers’ apocalyptic heat and counter their accusations. He published a commentary on Revelation in which he postponed the fulfillment of all “but the earliest chapters to the end time rather than to the history of the Church.”⁷³ Hence, this end-time period could not then be present, the Pope could not be the Antichrist, nor could the Catholic Church be the Beast of Revelation. Historicist author, Robert Caringola, further claimed that Ribera was also the first to teach that “Daniel’s 70th week was still future” and that “God had first given us 69 weeks and that at the baptism of Jesus in 27 A.D. the 69 weeks concluded. . . . God extended or postponed the 70th week into the future to take place at the end of the age.”⁷⁴ Ice acknowledged that “Ribera . . . was one of the first to revive an undeveloped form of futurism.”⁷⁵

In tandem with Ribera’s efforts and around 1614, a different maneuver took place. Another Jesuit by the name of Alcazar “proposed that the entire book of Revelation had already been fulfilled at the time of the pagan Roman empire under Nero, the ‘real’ Antichrist, and the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) or by the fall of pagan Rome (A.D. 410). This explanation was not then accepted but it was the forerunner of the ‘preterist’ (time that is past) view of the book of

⁶⁹ Paul Tillich, *A Complete History of Christian Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 121.

⁷⁰ Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, 32.

⁷¹ Westminster Confession of Faith, Ch. 25, sect. 6; Ch. 1, sect. 6. This was later removed.

⁷² Spykman, *Reformational Theology*, 518-519.

⁷³ Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, 37.

⁷⁴ Robert Caringola, *Seventy Weeks* (Springfield, MO.: Abundant Life Ministries, 1991), 35.

⁷⁵ Thomas Ice & Timothy Demy, gen. eds. *When the Trumpet Sounds*, 16.

Revelation.”⁷⁶ Caringola described this event thusly, “the preterist interpretation of Bible prophecy was birthed by the Jesuit Alcazar. He sought to relieve the papacy of the stigma of Antichrist by perverting the interpretation of the Book of Revelation.”⁷⁷ Ironically, the Catholic Church never has subscribed to either of these eschatological ideas. But the Protestant Church in America became heavily influenced by Ribera’s severance of Daniel’s 70th week away from the other 69, as we shall soon see.

In America during the 18th and 19th centuries, postmillennialism was the “dominant influence.”⁷⁸ It flowed off the heels of the Enlightenment and pressed forth “an optimistic view of the world” as “the world would be converted to Christ, and peace, happiness, and righteousness would reign for a thousand years.”⁷⁹ This optimistic, kingdom-expanding eschatology remained the dominant view through the first quarter of the 20th Century. But then came when two world wars, the invention of the atomic bomb, and the threat of a nuclear Armageddon. These world-shaking events discredited postmillennialism’s optimistic outlook.⁸⁰ Springing into the void and next onto the stage of prominence was a “new version of premillennialism.”⁸¹ Birthed in Europe, this previously unknown view was brought to America by John Nelson Darby. Darby rediscovered the old premillennial view but added a few things, as well.

Hoekema noted:

Though premillennialism has been taught by Christian theologians since the second century, the theological system known as dispensationalism, teaching as it does an absolute distinction between Israel and the church as two separate peoples of God, did not begin until the time of John Nelson Darby (1800-1882).⁸²

For one, Darby adopted Ribera’s severance idea for Daniel’s 70th week and its consequentially changed nature from a seven-year period of covenantal confirmation to a seven-year period of world tribulation. DeMar noted that “only dispensationalists believe that the seventieth week is yet to be fulfilled.

⁷⁶ Presbyterian Church (USA), *Minutes of the General Assembly* (Louisville, Ky, 1978), 213.

⁷⁷ Robert Caringola, *The Present Reign of Christ* (Springfield, MO.: Abundant Life Ministries, 1995), 294.

⁷⁸ Renald Showers, *Maranatha Our Lord, Come!* (Bellmawr, NJ.: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc. 1995), 145-146.

⁷⁹ Kyle, *The Last Days Are Here Again*, 188.

⁸⁰ For a detailed review and discussion of the history of prophetic beliefs in American Culture, see Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More* (Cambridge, MA.: The Bleknap Press of Harvard University, 1992), 80-254.

⁸¹ Kyle, *The Last Days Are Here Again*, 188.

⁸² Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1979), 186.

Without a futurized seventieth week, the dispensationalist system falls apart.”⁸³ He further remarked that this supposed and yet-future, “seven years of the Great Tribulation” has “no [biblical] proof whatsoever.”⁸⁴

Darby added to his new version of premillennialism a new theory called the “Rapture.”⁸⁵ Neither the Rapture nor the idea of two different redemptive plans—one for Israel and one for the Church—had never been taught or even heard of in the Church prior to Darby. Ladd remarked that many have reluctantly called this view “Darbyism.”⁸⁶ One reason is, Darby personally helped popularized his new premillennial view in America, along with Scofield. Grudem also acknowledged that “dispensationalism as a system began with the writings of J.N. Darby (1800 – 1882) in Great Britain, but was popularized in the USA through the Scofield Reference Bible.”⁸⁷ It was further popularized in elaborate end-time prophecy charts published in Clarence Larkin’s *Dispensational Truth* (Larkin 1918). It caught on like wildfire. Helping this new teaching’s rapid rise to prominence was also a fundamentalist reaction against the liberal incursions of the 19th and 20th centuries. But once Israel was re-birthed as a nation in 1948, the stamp of authentication seemed to have placed on this newly revised, premillennial dispensational view. Critics of the view became strangely silent in the wake of mounting evidence that the world was now suppose to get worse and worse until the return of Christ.

In conservative evangelical churches in America today, Darby’s brand of premillennial dispensationalism is the predominant and popular view. Primarily, it has been popularized by writers like Hal Lindsey in *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Lindsey 1970) by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins in their *Left Behind* (LaHaye and Jenkins 1995) book series. According to this view, we are now to be looking for an impending rapture, a future 7-year period of great tribulation, a coming millennial reign of Christ on the earth, and the reestablishment of Israel as a theocracy. It must be emphasized, however, that historic premillennialist and progressive dispensationalist scholars do not subscribe to major portions of this view. What is more, the majority of professing Christians do not agree with it or hold it. But today, premillennial dispensationalism commands the popular stage. The other views have been rendered essentially impotent in the popular media and relegated to only minor hearings against the dominance and persuasive might of this view’s broad appeal.

This brief historical overview brings us to the present and our current state of disarray, confusion, and divisiveness. We still have three major

⁸³ Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, 170.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁸⁵ Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 248.

⁸⁶ Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, 37.

⁸⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 860.

eschatological views and a fourth, little-known view vying for attention and recognition. But no consensus is in sight.

Contemporary Works

An abundance of literature characterizes the contemporary field of eschatology. For this study, though, only principle authors and works will be used. From them, I will draw out the major distinctives of each view concerning the return of Christ and identify the major strengths and weaknesses. I will also collect and analyze the critical assessments of each view by others. However, most of these contemporary works are one-sided in their treatment. While quick to point out the weaknesses, or errors, in an opposing view, or views, they consistently fail to recognize weaknesses in their own view or to give credit to other views for strengths. I have only found a few minor exceptions to this. None, however, has addressed the full range of four conservative, eschatological views. Therefore, they can only be considered partial treatments.

For example, the amillennial book, *Prophecy and the Church* (Allis 1945), disputed the dispensationalist claim that the Church is a mystery and the Old Testament promises are to be fulfilled by Israel and not the Church. In *The Millennium*, (Boettner 1987), the author contrasted the postmillennial distinctives of the thousand year reign in Revelation 20 versus only the amillennial and premillennial views. Firing back in *Dominion Theology* (House and Ice 1988), two premillennial dispensationalists critiqued postmillennialism. In *Premillennialism or Amillennialism* (Feinberg 1954), the premillennial author compared and contrasted one with the other, but argued for his view. In *The Bible and the Future* (Hoekema 1979), the renowned amillennialist author interacted with both the postmillennial and premillennial (including historic premillennialism) views, all the while arguing for his “already/not yet” distinctive.

A step in the right direction of synthesis is *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Blaising and Bock 1993). These “progressive” authors have attempted to modify some of the key distinctives of their own view. No longer do these premillennial dispensationalists see the Church as a “parenthesis” in God’s redemptive plan. Likewise, they have backed off of the radical distinction between Israel and Church. They also have softened their view’s famed literal hermeneutic, if not discarded it, as an essential element. While these progressive efforts are welcomed, Blaising and Bock have not gone far enough to correct the “difficulties” (i.e. weaknesses) of their popular view.

Unfortunately, few recent monographs are available for the historicist interpretation of Revelation. But this paucity is explained in *The Present Reign of Jesus Christ* (Caringola 1995). Caringola stated that his book is the first complete historicist interpretation of the book of Revelation written in the United States in nearly fifty years. Hence, he cited and summarized numerous

volumes of historicist literature from the past. Next he rebuked two views, the dispensational and preterist schemes before explaining the linear-historic-fulfillment perspective that characterized the eschatological beliefs of the 16th-century Reformers. Again, this historicist view helped fuel Reformation fervor against the Pope and the Catholic Church.

Perhaps the best idealist (eclectic) work is *More than Conquerors* (Hendricksen 1940). This well-received and widely circulated commentary on the book of Revelation stresses the idealist's hallmark theme of timelessness. Hendricksen believes that Christians living in John's day, the first century, furnished the original occasion for this prophecy. But it is equally intended, or relevant, for believers of every generation. G.K. Beale's recent work, *The Book of Revelation* (Eerdmans 1999), also advocated this view. Both books, however, hold out for a future, great, and historic, consummation event at the return of Christ.

In the preterist camp, *The Last Days According to Jesus* (Sproul 1998) has had a major impact in enhancing the current visibility and credibility of the preterist view. Its widely respected Reformed author carefully examined and evaluated the various claims of preterism, both full and partial. Milton S. Terry's classic *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Terry 1890, 1999) presented numerous preterist interpretative principles for the Bible's prophetic symbolism and its apocalyptic books. Additionally, one of my three trade-published preterist works, *Beyond the End Times* (Noe 1999), was named one of the top three books by *Christianity Today* magazine in its "The Millennial Book Awards" article, October 25, 1999, issue (pp. 77-78). My second published work was *Shattering the 'Left Behind' Delusion* (Noe 2000). This book addressed what partial-preterist author, R.C. Sproul called preterism's "fatal flaw . . . its treatment of the final resurrection."⁸⁸ This summer my third preterist book was introduced at the Christian Booksellers Association Convention in Atlanta. It is titled *Dead In Their Tracks: Stopping the Liberal/Skeptic Attack on the Bible* (Noe 2001).

Lastly, are the typical "four views" books that basically present what is termed the academic approach. These are books such as: *Revelation Four Views* (Gregg 1997), *Four Views on the Book of Revelation* (Pate 1998), and *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Clouse 1977). In this type of approach, distinctives of four views are outlined, and interaction and criticism between views are allowed. But the reader is left to decide for himself what to believe or who is right. I agree with Grudem's take on "four views" books, "they are by definition not the solution."⁸⁹ In the field of eschatology, they either don't cover, or inadequately cover, the preterist view, and they fail to

⁸⁸ Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus*, 203.

⁸⁹ Wayne Grudem, "Do We Act As If We Really Believe that 'The Bible Alone, and the Bible in Its Entirety, Is the Word of God Written'?", *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (March 2000): 10.

bring about any reconciliation—except, of course, for the traditional conciliatory concession to “agree to disagree.”

One other semi-refreshing exception is Millard J. Erickson’s book, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology* (Baker Books, 1977, 1998). To his credit, Erickson utilized an interesting strength-weakness format in analyzing his view, premillennialism, with postmillennialism and amillennialism. Unfortunately, he did not address the preterist view, nor did he offer any synthesis.

In sum, Crutchfield hit the proverbial nail on the head as he captured the circularity of confusion that is still most evident today. “The cause of the confusion among modern scholars on this issue is no mystery. They are confused because the fathers were confused on the subject.”⁹⁰ The bottom line is, there is no consensus in the field of eschatology regarding the return of Christ or other, associated, and eschatological events and issues. But the return of Christ is the focal point upon which all hinges.

Synthesization Attempts

No comprehensive works are known to exist that have attempted any synthesization or reconciliation of all four eschatological views. As a seven-year member of the Evangelical Theological Society, I have personally monitored seven years of its journal, JETS, and consulted with numerous follow members. I have also discussed my study’s research problem, question, and thesis with six Trinity faculty (including Dr. Edward Martin). No one knows of any such works. At most, a scant few journal articles and dissertations have made partial attempts—i.e. comparing and contrasting only two or three of the four views and leaving the other view(s) untouched.

Erickson, for instance, referred to J. Barton Payne’s attempt “to synthesize the major strengths of the three methods of prophetic interpretation: historical, futurist, and preterist.”⁸⁹ Payne’s treatment, however, was cursory and shallow. But he rightly concluded:

... any of the three methods if used rigorously ... is productive of confusion. Actually, there are not a few alleged antecedents to Christ’s return that may better be understood as having attained their fulfillment in the ancient past and hence as of no continuing prophetic significance whatsoever. Space forbids an exhaustive treatment of Biblical prophecy in reference to these three methods of approach.⁹²

⁹⁰ Larry V. Crutchfield “The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation in the Apostolic Fathers” chapter in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, 88.

⁸⁹ Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology*, 179.

⁹² J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1962), 106.

Hopefully, “space” will not “forbid” my doing what Payne proclaimed but fell far short of accomplishing.

Turner advocated that “some combination of the two (preterist-futurist views)” offered “the most promising solution to the exegetical difficulties of this [Matthew 24:1-41] passage.”⁹³ But his treatment was limited to this passage. Dockery was definitely on the right track when he recommended that the book of Revelation be approached from both the preterist and futurist views:

Both the futurist and preterist views have their strengths and weaknesses. Instead of choosing only one or the other, a “both/and” approach that applies the strengths of each is a better option. . . . Combining the preterist and futurist views allows us to understand both that the message of Revelation spoke directly to John’s own age and that it represents the consummation of redemptive history. . . . The preterist position by itself fails to understand that Revelation confronts the modern reader with promises, challenges, and choices that are similar, if not identical to those faced by the book’s original readers. The futurist position by itself is prone to see Revelation as a crystal ball with a literal timetable of events that will happen in the future.⁹⁴

But Dockery limited his scope to only the book of Revelation and did not incorporate the idealist or historicist approaches.

Moody employed a novel methodology in his Ph.D. dissertation. He attempted to satisfy the tension between the timing of Christ’s *Parousia* between a preterist and futurist understanding. He elasticized its fulfillment nature from A.D. 70 through “the end of human history.”⁹⁵

The model is a *Parousia* beginning with the judgment coming of Jesus in or around A.D. 70, an abiding presence reflected in His reigning rule over the nations and the Church and the “not yet” ending of the *Parousia* in His final “appearance.”⁹⁶

While I have basic hermeneutical disagreements with each of these synthesis attempts, they are attempts. For that I applaud them. They are steps in the right direction and precursors of what I propose to do. But they are too limited in scope and not as comprehensive as I intend to be.

Although he did not mention the preterist view, Grenz certainly grasped the validity of a synthesis concept when he discerned that “we would be mistaken if we merely weighed the evidence, chose one, and ignored the other

⁹³ David L. Turner, “The Structure and Sequence of Matthew 24:1-41: Interaction with Evangelical Treatments,” *Grace Theological Journal* 10.1 (1989): 3, 26.

⁹⁴ David S. Dockery, “Is Revelation Prophecy or History?,” *Christianity Today*, 25 October 1999, 86.

⁹⁵ Stanley A. Moody, “The Nature of the Parousia: Truth as Dialectic” (Ph.D. diss., Trinity Theological Seminary, 1999), 222.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 224.

two. The Spirit has something important to tell us in each of the three traditional views of the millennium.”⁹⁷

One thing four of the above five synthesization attempts have in common is their incorporation of the preterist view. I agree. In my opinion, the preterist view is the starting point, but not the finishing point, for eschatological reform. It must be a significant part of this study’s synthesizing endeavor.

In an effort to discover more possible synthesizing attempts, I recently employed the services of two professional researchers whom were recommended by Trinity. They are EPA Research and Ruth Dalman.

In an email on August 8, 2001 EPA reported:

. . . we began the research last Friday but came up dry, except for one article that may not even be relevant. So, now we have your project scheduled for tomorrow morning.⁹⁸

On August 10, 2001:

We have researched two databases of journal articles and one database of books on your topic with mixed results. . . . the articles and books retrieved so far have not addressed your topic specifically Rather, they tend to discuss specific aspects of the individual keyword, or there was no information at all in the three databases we searched.⁹⁹

On August 8, 2001 Rodger Dalman, Ruth’s husband and a professor with Trinity, related that “she couldn’t get anywhere with it. It is pretty hard to find sources that have tried to integrate eschatological perspectives”¹⁰⁰

I intend, however, to undertake further research and discovery efforts once my proposal is approved and during the writing of the rough draft.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Thesis Statement

No single view is sufficient. But a sound biblical solution is available to the confusion, conflict, and divisiveness of the Church’s four comprehensive views of the return of Christ. That solution is a solution of synthesis—reducing

⁹⁷ Stanley J. Grenz, “The 1,000-year Question: Timeless truths behind the debates over Christ’s return,” *Christianity Today*, 8 March 1993, 35.

⁹⁸ Eva Perkins, EPA Research, August 8, 2001, email.

⁹⁹ Eva Perkins, EPA Research, August 10, 2001, email.

¹⁰⁰ Rodger Dalman, August 8, 2001, email.

the four views down into one meaningful, coherent, and consistent whole. Each view contains identifiable and demonstrable, strengths and weaknesses. Synthesis will be achieved by keeping and consolidating the strengths and discarding all weaknesses. This integrating process will proceed in a chronological fulfillment order. Thus, I will start with the preterist view and progress through the premillennial, amillennial, and postmillennial views. The historicist and idealist interpretations of the book of Revelation will be covered under the amillennial view. Within premillennialism, I will address historic premillennialism, dispensational premillennialism, and the recently developed progressive dispensationalism.

Scope and Delimitations

Ladd, in his well-known book, *the Presence of the Future*, correctly and succinctly identified the two central problems in a study of Jesus' ministry and his central teaching on the eschatological kingdom of God as those of "time" and "nature."¹⁰¹

Consequently, my first focus for each view in this study will be on how they handle the time of Christ's return. Timing is the primary defining characteristic and categorization element distinguishing the four views. It will also be the primary synthesizing element. Next, I will cover each view's major tenets regarding the nature of this fulfillment. Once the timing issue is resolved, I believe nature issues will readily fall into place.

I, however, will not attempt to answer every question, solve every issue, or explain every prophetic passage or verse. I will principally address the dominant eschatological issue of the return of Christ. On the other hand, I acknowledge that "four chief moments dominate the eschatological expectation of early Christian theology—the return of Christ, known as the Parousia, the resurrection, the judgment, and the catastrophic ending of the present world-order."¹⁰² These other, related, and interconnect "moments" will be brought into the discussion where and when appropriate. Minor issues will not be addressed, such as the identity of the two witnesses (Rev. 11), who is or was Paul's "man of sin" (2 Thess. 2:1-12), or whether the so-called "Rapture" will be pre-, mid-, or post-tribulational. These, and many other, minor issues are not essential to the synthesizing process I propose. They, too, will be better understood once a synthesis of Christ's return has been achieved. And/or, they will become subjects for future research and re-study in light of this study's conclusions.

¹⁰¹ George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1974), 125.

¹⁰² J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 462.

This scope and delimitation will simplify and expedite the synthesization process.

Definition of Terms

End Times – The period of time in human history when God’s plan of redemption was or will be completed by the Messiah.

Eschatology – the study of last things, a branch of theology.

Preterist – the eschatological view that most or all end-time prophecies have been fulfilled, including Christ’s return, and in association with the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.¹⁰³

Historicist – the interpretive approach that some or most of the prophecies of the book of Revelation have been fulfilled during the Church age, some are being fulfilled today, and some are yet to be fulfilled.

Premillennial – composed of three varieties: 1) *dispensational premillennialism* – the eschatological view that Christ’s return is future and comes in two stages before a literal thousand year and earthly reign. Also, the kingdom has been postponed, or at least placed in a mystery status, Christ is currently waiting to reign, and a 7-year period of great tribulation and the Antichrist lies ahead. The Church will not be present on earth during this tribulation, having been raptured prior to its occurrence. 2) *historic premillennialism* – the eschatological view that Christ’s return is future and comes before a literal or symbolic thousand-year period and temporary earthly reign. Before that, the Church will go through a time of tribulation and Christ’s return will be a single event. 3) *progressive dispensationalism* – the recently developed eschatological view that Christ’s return is future and comes before a literal or symbolic thousand-year period and temporary earthly reign. The kingdom, however, is here in an ‘already/not yet’ realization, Christ is currently reigning from heaven, the Church is not a parenthesis in God’s redemptive plan, and a period of great tribulation and the Antichrist lie ahead. The Church will not be present on earth during this tribulation, having been raptured prior to its occurrence.

Amillennial – the eschatological view that Christ’s return is future but can come at any time during Christ’s present millennial reign. This millennium is an unspecified period of time but longer than a literal thousand years. It symbolizes a spiritual reign in the souls of individuals, in the life of the Church,

¹⁰³ For a fuller description of the four eschatological views and two interpretive approaches briefly defined here see: Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1109-1114; C. Marvin Pate, *Four Views on the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 1998), 17-34; Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 173-193; and Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology*, 53-106.

and/or of saints currently in heaven. No future, thousand-year, golden age on the earth is foreseen prior to the setting up of an eternal state at Christ's return.

Postmillennial – the eschatological view that Christ's return is future and comes at the end of a present millennial period (also longer than a literal thousand years). He is now Lord over all spheres of human life, and his people have been called and empowered to extend his present kingdom for the purpose of transforming all, or most of, culture and society into the will of Christ.

Idealist (eclectic) – the interpretive approach that the prophecies contained in the book of Revelation are timeless. They either do not relate to specific historical events. Or, they portray an ongoing conflict between spiritual beings and forces which involve humankind and have many fulfillments or applications throughout history, presently, and forever.

Major distinctives – main ideas, generally accepted concepts and/or explanations.

Synthesis – the combination of parts or elements into a whole.

Synthesize – to put together or combine into a complex whole.

Assumptions

1. Since God is not the author of confusion (1 Cor. 14:33), I assume that it was not and is not his character or nature to have included in his Word any content that would create the amount of confusion, conflict, divisiveness, and/or ambivalence we see among Christians in this area of eschatology. I assume that we are the ones who have misconstrued the whole thing.
2. The Bible is the inspired, inerrant, and infallible Word of God. By it, and not by creeds, confessions, or traditions, we are to be like the Bereans (Acts 17:11) and “Test everything. Hold on to the good” (1 Thess. 5:21). This we do in the interest of seeking truth.
3. We are not as gullible now as we have been in previous times. Christians are more open than ever for a better way to understand and explain the meaning and fulfillment of end-time prophecy. During the centuries, God has been leading the Church in a better understanding of the faith on such matters as the Trinity, the two natures of Jesus Christ, sin, grace, atonement, and justification by faith. Eschatology may be next—*Ecclesia Reformata Semper Reformanda*.
4. This may be the time that God has decided for his great plan of redemption (what eschatology is all about) to be better understood. I assume that He is pointing the way to a synthesis of views that is more faithful to his Word than any of the four views on its own.

5. Eschatology is an area filled with the use of artificial interpretative devices that are necessitated by traditions. They will not stand up to an honest and objective test of Scripture.

PROPOSED LOGIC, STRUCTURE AND STRATEGY OF THIS STUDY

Logic

The present-day field of eschatology is a maze of four views, along with two interpretive approaches to the book of Revelation, that seems hopelessly deadlocked. I believe this standoff can be resolved, scripturally.

Each view contains some sound biblical strengths. But each view also embraces some exegetical problems, inherent contradictions, and/or glaring inconsistencies, and makes some wrong conclusions. These weaknesses, or errors, are products of tradition. But they can be identified and their lack of scriptural support demonstrated (Acts 17:11; 1 Thess. 5:21).

More often than not, we are unaware of the weaknesses inherent in our own view, until someone takes the time to point them out to us. I will make every effort I possibly can to be objective and gracious in exposing these blind spots for each view, including the preterist to which I mostly adhere. Others can judge whether I have succeeded or failed, or was objective or biased.

I further propose to begin the simplifying and unifying of the field of eschatology by a synthesization treatment that is focused on the return of Christ, meets all hermeneutical and exegetical demands, and does not contradict itself. This is significant because, and as I will show, none of the four eschatological views meets all these criteria.

Logically, eschatology is not only a hermeneutical (interpretive) issue, it is also a philosophical (worldview) and psychological (emotional) issue that has become a paradigm (mindset) problem. We tend to believe what we want to believe and to adjust our hermeneutic(s) accordingly. In my opinion, this is the root-source of most, if not all, of our disarray and confusion. It is why volumes have been written attempting to dilute, water down, or explain away clear and concise, textual statements. It is why some have ascribed errors of perspective to Jesus and the inspired New Testament writers. Others have postulated failure, delay, or postponement notions, or contrasted God's time clock in comparison to man's, or taken a fulfilled-and-over stance. Many have redefined "imminency" to mean "certainty" and stretched its timeframe for nineteen centuries and counting. This stretch has been "justified" with hidden gaps, necessitated intervals, foreshortened perspectives, blending of things near and far, etc., etc. Others have overly spiritualized some real events. These are some of the interpretive techniques being employed in one or more of the four eschatological views. But they are not supportable by Scripture and are not sound

hermeneutics. They are artificial devices that have been imposed upon the text without scriptural warrant and in support of a particular eschatological tradition. They are weaknesses that will be scripturally demonstrated and discarded prior to synthesis.

On a more positive note, I believe our understanding of hermeneutics is getting better and better all the time. If we do not believe we can make progress in our understanding of God's Word, why bother studying hermeneutics and trying to refine our methodology? Edward E. Stevens grasped this evolutionary progression in writing:

. . . our understanding of Scripture is getting progressively better. We did not start out with a perfect understanding. We instead started out with a perfect *revelation*, but a very imperfect *understanding* of it. One implication of a progressive understanding is that [some] older concepts will be found slightly or largely in error, requiring adjustment or replacement by the better understanding.¹⁰⁴

Iain Murry wrote regarding this same progressive-development-in-understanding idea:

. . . the constant business of the Church [is] to seek a larger knowledge of Scripture . . . 'We are but touching the fringes of the mystery of God's will . . .'¹⁰⁵

Surely, we have come to the point in Church history where we can sense that something is severely wrong in the field of eschatology. And while we want to build on the understandings of the past, we should also want to discard its failures. Recently, we have seen a movement from a small vanguard of literature toward a synthesization of views. This approach and methodology is exactly what has been lacking in the past.

These precursors of the synthesis concept have given me confidence that a broader synthesization may be possible. Now the time may be right to come together around the purity of God's Word and to provide a better biblical view of Christ's return—one that makes sense, and is more Christ-honoring, more Scripture-authenticating, and more faith-validating than just the four views by themselves. This potential needs to be explored and developed. A synthesis of this key aspect is what I propose to do in this study. Only what is supported by Scripture will be kept and synthesized. What is not supportable must be discarded. Additionally, the collaborating statements and criticisms of other scholars relating to the strengths and weaknesses of the different views will be

¹⁰⁴ Stevens, Stevens Response To Gentry, 14.

¹⁰⁵ Iain Murray (1977) said about John Murray in the Preface to Vol. 2 of the *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh, Carlisle, PA.: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), Preface.

analyzed, weighed against this standard, and utilized wherever possible as further support for this culling-out and synthesization process.

Moreover, I believe the whole divisive field of eschatological views can be fully synthesized, harmonized, and unified. But this will begin by synthesizing one of its “four chief moments.”¹⁰⁶ Thus, Christ’s return will be the focus of this study. I further believe that a tremendous joy and excitement will accompany a well-reasoned resolution of this age-long standoff and the offering of a viable alternative to the categorization system of eschatological views that has greatly divided the Church.

Structure

The first three chapters will be the standard introduction, focused literature review, and research method chapters. Chapter four will be a presentation of the four views. A time and nature-of-fulfillment format will be used for each view. These four views will be presented in chronological fulfillment order—preterist, premillennial, amillennial, and postmillennial. Chapter five will be the synthesis analysis following the same time and nature format. Rationale for this procedure and process will be discussed and strengths and weaknesses will be identified and supported. Weaknesses will be discarded and strengths kept and synthesized into one meaningful, coherent, and consistent whole. Completing the dissertation will be a chapter on summary, conclusion, and recommendations, a bibliography, and a few possible appendices.

Strategy

The primary strategy of this study is recognizing that no single view is sufficient, nor is it totally right or totally wrong. Each view has strengths and weaknesses. The identification of these strengths and weaknesses provides the basis for a solution of synthesis.

Sources

The major distinctives for each view, as well as, the strengths and weaknesses analysis will be derived from principle works (monographs) and authors. Journal indexes, bibliographies, abstracts, and unpublished dissertations will be searched for synthesis attempts. Since no synthesization works of the scope I propose have been found, to date, by me and two

¹⁰⁶ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 462.

professional researchers, I doubt that further research will be very productive. But more is planned during the rough draft stage. If nothing significant is still found, then this will further confirm that the field is wide open for the original and scholarly contribution being herein proposed.

Limitations and Weaknesses

1. Allowance must be made for Deuteronomy 29:29: “the secret things belong to the Lord.” There will always be things we humans will never completely understand or agree upon. However, the second half of this verse is just as relevant: “. . . but the things revealed belong to us and to our children, forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.” Even though God’s Word has been totally and perfectly revealed, God is still revealing things from his Word. Hence, we should continue to pray for God’s “Spirit of wisdom and revelation” (Eph. 1:17).

2. This study will not cover everything. Eschatology is a huge subject. As already quoted, Sproul reported, “It has been argued that no less than two thirds of the content of the New Testament is concerned directly or indirectly with eschatology” (see quote on page 18). Also, Walvoord noted that “between one-fifth and one-fourth of the Bible is prophecy” (see quote on page 9). Consequently, we are not dealing with a fringe issue. One’s particular view, non-view, or confusion over the timing and nature of the return of Christ and the fulfillment of all end-time Bible prophecy will *greatly impact* one’s understanding, non-understanding, or confusion of many other aspects of our faith and the Christian life, as well. What I do not and cannot address in this study must become topics for future writings and/or other studies.

3. Within each of the four comprehensive views are variations that need not be addressed in order to accomplish this study’s proposed synthesization objective. For example, contained within the premillennial view are the sub-categories of pre-tribulational, mid-tribulational, post-tribulational, and prewrath-rapture, or what some call two-thirds-tribulational. Most, but not all, of the principle strengths and weakness of the whole premillennial view, regarding the return of Christ, apply to each of these variants.

4. Limiting the topical focus of this study to principally addressing only one aspect in the eschatological schema is necessary for length and depth of treatment reasons. Other aspects, however, are strategically related and interconnected. They, too, must be brought into the discussion where and when appropriate. But they will not receive equal treatment or development. Unfortunately, critics often assail a work based on what was not addressed. The implication is that the author avoided those things that would not fit. Hence, this study’s focus on the return of Christ must only be viewed as a first step in the greater endeavor of fully synthesizing these four eschatological views.

BACK MATTER

Major Strengths / Weaknesses Recap: (Preliminary List)

PRETERIST VIEW:

- Strengths: Honors the meaning of eschatological timeframes and time statements, literally and seriously.
Use of biblical precedent to explain the nature of fulfillment.
- Weaknesses: Lack of attention in writings to the nature of post-A.D.-70 reality.
Many preterists advocate annihilation of Satan, his kingdom, operation of angels, even the Holy Spirit, miraculous gifts, etc.
Overly spiritualizing Christ's return, resurrection, and his kingdom.
Limiting the comings of Jesus to only two.

PREMILLENNIALIST VIEW:

- Strengths: Emphasis on the dynamic role of Christ in the present and future affairs of men.
Claim that eschatology pertains to the end of the Jewish age.
Realization that, at least, one coming of Christ is not visible.
- Weaknesses: Interrupting of divine time frames without clear textual justification.
Interpretation by exception—change the meaning of commonly used and understood words in the time statements.
Postulating a postponed kingdom of God.
Advocating a future 7-year period of tribulation
Separate redemptive plans for the Church and Israel.
The denigration of the Church as unforeseen and a parenthesis in the redemptive plan of God.
A future restoration of the old Judaic order
Negative worldview

AMILLENNIALIST VIEW:

- Strengths: Emphasis on the literal/unseen realities behind symbolic fulfillment.
 Recognition that the “last days” existed in the first century.
 The present reality of the kingdom reign of Christ.
 Rejection of the idea of a future kingdom.
- Weaknesses: Belief that the Jewish age, the Old Covenant order, and the law were completely fulfilled and removed, and that all Old Testament promises/prophesies were fulfilled, accomplished, and completed at the Cross.
 The New Covenant began and was fully in force at Pentecost—i.e.the full establishment of the kingdom/Church/New Covenant order was given, perfected, and fulfilled.
 The Church is the replacement of Israel.
 Adherence to an unscriptural “end of time” paradigm.
 Claim that eschatology pertains to the end of the Christian age, or to a split fulfillment in time and disposition (Jewish age/Christian age) with a gap of thousands of years in between.
 An intermediate state of disembodied existence in Heaven.
 A future evil-less, utopian, and eternal state on earth.
 Negative worldview.

POSTMILLENNIALIST VIEW:

- Strengths: Positive emphasis and motivation for human effort to expand God’s kingdom on earth as it is in Heaven
 Positive worldview.
 Recognition of many comings of Christ
- Weaknesses: Insistence that the world must be Christianized before Christ can return.
 Adherence to an unscriptural “end of time” paradigm.
 Claim that eschatology pertains to the end of the Christian age.
 A future evil-less, utopian, and eternal state on earth.
 Postulating two or more *parousia* returns of Jesus.
 Postulating a final coming and last judgment, after which there will be no more.

IDEALIST APPROACH:

Strength: Emphasis on the ongoing nature and timeless application of Christ's involvement in human affairs as well as the whole of the prophecy of the book of Revelation.

Weakness: Difficulty in identifying specific historical events as fulfillments.

HISTORICIST APPROACH:

Strength: Recognition of a post-A.D.-70 and past-fulfillment relevancy for portions of the prophecy of the book of Revelation in church and world history.

Weaknesses: Difficulty in identifying specific historical events as fulfillments.
Adherence to an unscriptural "end of time" paradigm.
Claim that eschatology pertains to the end of the Christian age.

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**Synthesizing
Four Views
of the
Return of
Christ**

— *Ph.D. Dissertation Proposal* —

by

John Noe

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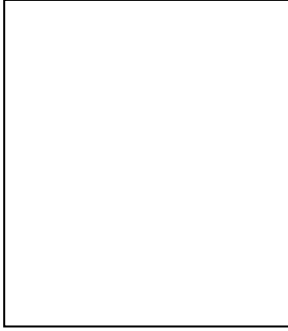
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